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CAPITAL LETTER

by C. T. HANSON

The new plumbers

The Washington Post reported recently that a group of Argentine journalists had provided their own finale to a televised Buenos Aires press conference on the Falkland Islands crisis by shouting "Long live the Fatherland!"

This demonstration was not too surprising in a military dictatorship that had just seized the long-coveted islands. Nor was it surprising that Ronald Reagan decided to lend Mrs. Thatcher a hand in her efforts to restore British democracy — including, presumably, the benefits of a free press — to those beleaguered Falkland shepherds.

What was ironic was Reagan's simultaneous pursuit of a much less libertarian version of Anglo-American solidarity: In April, the administration quickened its effort to impose a *de facto*, British-style official secrets act to curb press criticism of U.S. military policies. It is a program in the tradition of secretive Whitehall: harsh punishment of leakers; tougher restrictions on information; and, in one instance, evident cooperation with British intelligence to keep an embarrassing item from the reading public in both nations.

Since the president stopped well short of joining the Falklands hostilities, there was considerable amazement at an April 27 press conference when Pentagon spokesman Henry Catto justified the tough policy on secrets as follows: "You will remember the posters in World War Two, 'Loose lips sink ships.' "

Question: We are not at war.

Catto: That is true [but leaks are] giving aid and comfort to adversaries.

Question: The Soviets, or congressional critics of the budget?

Catto: I had in mind the Soviets.

There is contrary evidence, however.

Indeed, the administration's philosophy

chance to be sunk on the high seas.

Take the proposal to build two huge nuclear-powered aircraft carriers at an estimated total cost of nearly \$7 billion. As Congress was deliberating the issue, retired Navy Lieutenant Commander Dean Knuth drafted an article for *Naval Institute Proceedings* pointing out that such huge carriers had proved very vulnerable to guided weapons in recent war games. But on May 3 the Pentagon pounced, stamping the article "secret" and blocking publication. (The next day, HMS Sheffield was blown out of the South Atlantic by a single guided rocket, underscoring the vulnerability of surface ships, but it was beyond the Pentagon's power to classify that incident.)

Suppressing the carrier article was but a small part of the larger mosaic. Some bureaucrats have been forced to sign pledges never to release official information without permission. President Reagan signed an executive order in April making it easier for officials to classify documents, thereby undermining the Freedom of Information Act and impeding the access of writers and scholars to foreign policy documents.

And then there was the ordeal of John C. F. Tillson IV. A fourth generation West Pointer, winner of two Silver Stars and a Purple Heart in Vietnam, Tillson stood accused of the ultimate disloyalty — leaking sensitive information to *The Washington Post*.

Post reporter George Wilson wrote last January that the Joint Chiefs of Staff thought that up to an additional \$750 billion dollars — above and beyond the \$1.6 trillion already requested — would be needed over the next five years to implement Reagan's ambitious global anti-Soviet strategy. This report put Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger in the curiously contradictory and ambi-

Soviet threat can scarcely be exaggerated, and that it has been overblown by the top U.S. military officers.

No sooner had the *Post* story appeared than an inquisition by lie detector was imposed on the thirty-odd officials who had been privy to the secret. Tillson, a manpower analyst, was among the suspects. He failed the test three times and so was ordered fired, partly to set a frightening example to would-be leakers, according to Henry Catto.

The information Tillson is accused of leaking was not classified, only "official" — a broad category indeed.

Tillson fervently denied the charge and Wilson says, "I wrote Weinberger and told him this guy is one hundred percent innocent as far as being my source goes." His letter suggested that Tillson was nervous during the tests because of prior contacts with Wilson on Capitol Hill, where the accused man once worked.

Yet the Pentagon, in its eagerness to set an example, continued to rely on lie-detector evidence that courts deem highly unreliable. It kept Tillson writhing in limbo for more than four months while the matter was consid-

